

Lecturers' Perceptions of Lectures

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores how lecturers across a range of subjects perceived lectures. In particular, what did they regard the role of modern technology to be. Twenty-five lecturers were interviewed, using a semi-structured schedule. Results indicated a range of views from the lecture as an inspirational address to providing a detailed outline of each point in a related sequence. Nearly all of the sample regarded their main function as transmitting knowledge in some form or other. There was a range of attitudes towards modern technology, from those who refused to use it to passionate advocates of Power Point presentations and advocates of the use of videos of world famous lecturers in the field.*

Introduction

The medieval educational format of lecturing is at the crossroads in terms of technological developments which have become available in the past few years. In the lecture theatre PowerPoint slides and videotapes are now available. The best lecturer in the world can present the appropriate lecture on videotape or CD. Outside the lecture theatre up-to-date material is available on the world wide web. Is the lecture still relevant? If so, what is its function in the 21st century?

A key factor in identifying the current aims of lecturers is lecturers' perceptions of what they are trying to achieve when they lecture. In this study we interviewed a sample of lecturers who are responsible for the delivery of courses of lectures to first year students. It is assumed that first year students entering university for the first time would find it harder to cope with lectures than more senior students. In a subsequent study it is planned to interview such students.

Background Literature

Remarkably little research has, as yet, been conducted specifically on how lecturers perceive lectures; although several authors (for example Prosser & Trigwell, 1997; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001) have discussed the role of lectures within teaching.

Without providing any empirical justification, Brown (1978) classified lectures into five categories.

1. The classical method. This is thought by Brown to be particularly suited to the sciences. The problem is stated, then the key points outlined. Examples are given. Any qualifications or reservations are made. Finally, the lecture is summarized.
2. The problem solving method. The problem is stated. Then alternative solutions are proposed. Finally, the lecturer's view of the solution to the problem (e.g. was Forster a great novelist?) is given.
3. The sequential method. This involves a sequence of linked statements of the main points (e.g. how the need to preserve the exchange rate led to the General Strike of 1926). The emphasis is on lecturing on the main points, which are themselves part of a logical sequence.
4. The comparative method. An example would be to compare and contrast Marx's and Weber's views of social class.
5. The thesis method. In this the lecturer makes an assertion at the outset, then subsequently makes the arguments in favour of this assertion.

A rare study which focused on the lecturers rather than the students was that by Sheffield (1974). He invited 23 Canadian teachers rated as excellent by their students to write about their teaching. They all regarded the lecture as the chief vehicle of their teaching. The aim of these teachers was to stimulate the students to become active learners. They also respected their students, were enthusiastic about their subject and lectured on general points rather than details. However, this was 30 years ago and the learning culture may have changed in many institutions since then. The technological possibilities have certainly been revolutionized.

A more recent study was that by Isaacs (1994) across a range of subjects at an Australian university. He found that amongst 100 lecturers the main aims of lectures were:

1. to make students think critically about the subject;
2. to demonstrate the way professionals reason in this subject;
3. to make students more enthusiastic about the subject;
4. to give students the most important factual information about the subject;
5. to explain the most difficult points;
6. to demonstrate how to solve problems;
7. to provide a framework for the students' private study.

To achieve these aims most lecturers wanted students to take notes, both as a structure and to facilitate further study. To aid this a high proportion of the lecturers distributed handouts before the lecture.

Northcott (2001) sought neither the lecturers' nor the students' perceptions of the experience. However, she conducted an interesting and important investigation of the interactive style of lecturing within an MBA course with an international group of mature students. The issue of whether this interactive method or the more formal

unidirectional method of lecturing is more suitable for first year undergraduates will be investigated in this study.

There would appear to be more research on how students perceive lectures than on how lecturers perceive lectures.

McKeachie (1978) found that the effectiveness of lectures cannot be divorced from the college culture: what is effective in an instrumental culture may be ineffective in a culture which values intrinsic learning.

Entwistle and Tait (1990) reported that students with a deep approach wanted lecturing which was challenging; whereas students with a surface approach wanted lecturing to be less demanding.

Hodgson (1997), in an empirical study, found that students were motivated by lectures extrinsically, intrinsically or vicariously. The latter was a bridge between the first and the second. A formally extrinsically motivated student was changed by a vicarious experience given to her/him by a charismatic lecturer to become an intrinsic learner.

Sutherland *et al.* (2002), in a complementary study to this one, investigated how 25 education students took notes at lectures. Why and how do first year students take notes? More than half had the instrumental goal of getting an accurate summary of the lecture to use for subsequent essays and/or exams. The more able student regarded lectures as a means of obtaining further recommended reading from the lecturer. Eight tried to get down the main points or added their own points to those provided by the lecturer; whereas five merely tried to take down every word.

Armbruster (2000) laid particular stress on how lectures can be improved: the criterion for this being improved notetaking by students. Kierwa (1985) found that if lecturers give students handouts (in the form of partial outlines), the note taking of students improved. Kierwa *et al.* (1988) also found that in general students wrote more ideas down if they watched videotapes of a lecture as well as the original.

Hartley (2002) is one of the few authors who refer to the new technologies which have been introduced. However, he reported that most studies of how students actually use the new technologies are still taking place. Two which have been published are by Kewell and Beeby (2003) and Nicol *et al.* (2003).

The UK government has started to value students' assessment of lectures. Drew (2001) conducted a study at Sheffield Hallam University on how students perceive lectures. She found that it was critical for the lecture to be delivered at the appropriate level for the student: too high a level left them confused whereas too low a level did not give them sufficient help. They liked to be given handouts (Power Point slides were not mentioned) and expected that lecturers should be good at explaining their subject.

From the students' point of view, Falk (1967) found that they wanted different and conflicting things from lectures. Mazuro *et al.* (2000) found that students largely had similar perceptions to their lecturers.

Students views on lecturing have been investigated in studies such as that of Sander *et al.* (2000). They found that, on the whole, first years prefer to be taught by interactive lectures and group-based activities rather than by formal lectures. Sander *et al.* (2000), using questionnaire data from three different British universi-

ties in three different subjects, found that students regarded the formal lecture as one of their least favoured academic formats. However, whether the students found lectures useful, even if they did not enjoy them, was apparently not investigated. Many students complained of being overwhelmed by information.

It is clear that much more empirical work needs to be done on what lecturers regard as the aims of lectures.

Methodology

It was decided to use a semi-structured interview in view of the meagre current database in this field. This would establish a baseline of exploratory data which could lead into later studies focusing on specific hypotheses.

We interviewed 25 lecturers across a range of subjects at one university in the UK. Our aims were to determine:

1. what these lecturers regarded as the purposes of lectures;
2. how these lecturers responded to the possibilities of modern technology, e.g. PowerPoint, videos, the Internet and the intranet;
3. whether these lecturers had used handouts and, if so, what was their aim and were there any disadvantages;
4. what was the relationship of their lecturing to assessment?

The lecturers were interviewed by one of the authors in their own rooms. The interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

Schedule for Interviewing Lecturers as to the Purpose of Lectures

1. What do you regard as the main function of lectures?
2. Are there any particular qualities which lectures in your subject should have, compared with other subjects?
3. What means of communication do you use?
 - (a) oral?
 - (b) visual?
4. Do you use PowerPoint presentations?
 - (a) If you do, what do you regard as its main merits?
 - (b) If you don't, do you have any reasons for this?
5. How long should a lecture for undergraduates be?
6. Do you use handouts?
 - (a) If you do, what is their function:
 - to provide a complete record of all important points, so that the students can concentrate on listening to you?
 - to give the main points?

- to give information which is supplementary to the lecture?

(b) When do you give out the handouts:

- before the lecture?
- at the end of the lecture?
- during the lecture?
- at the end of one lecture prior to the next lecture?

7. Should there be any other activities involved besides delivery by the lecturer?

For example

- questions?
- discussion?
- workshop activities?
- videos?

8. Who are the students at your lectures? What is their

- age?
- gender?
- educational background ?
- country of origin?

9. Do you differentiate in any way for the range of the students?

10. (a) What do you expect students to do during your lectures? How do you communicate this to them?

(b) If you expect them to take notes, are they given any tuition in how to do this in the first year?

Are they encouraged to take down:

- the main points? If so, how are these conveyed to the students?
- everything you write down?
- everything you say?

11. Are your students encouraged to prepare for your lectures in any way? If so, how?

12. Do you expect your students to do anything after your lectures? If so, what?

13. Are your lectures connected with seminars in any way? If so, how?

14. For practical subjects only: are your lectures connected with practicals in any way? If so, how?

15. How are your lectures connected with assessment? What do you think is the most appropriate means of assessment for your subject?

Have you any other points to make about giving lectures which we have not asked?

Sample

All 30 lecturers who coordinated first year undergraduate programmes were approached. Twenty-eight agreed to be interviewed. However, it was not

TABLE I. Subject distribution of the sample of lecturers

3 Hard-pure	1 biology 1 environmental science 1 physics
3 Hard-applied	1 nursing 2 sports studies
12 Soft-pure	1 economics 1 history 2 media studies 2 philosophy 1 politics 3 psychology 1 religious studies 1 sociology
7 Soft-applied	3 business 3 education 1 law

possible to arrange interviews with three of them, which left 25, a high response rate.

The subject range of the 25 lecturers, as classified by Becher and Trowler’s (2001) categories, is presented in Table I.

Results

These are summarized in Tables II and III.

The Purpose of Lectures (raw data calibrated in Table II)

There was a considerable range in the responses.

- (a) There was straightforward provision of information in accountancy, business and biology. The highest proportion (80%) of the lecturers interviewed referred to this function.

TABLE II. The purpose of lectures

Purpose	Responses (n = 25)
Information transfer	20
Demonstration	13
Framework	12
Motivation	12
Analytical thinking	11
Social	3
Total	95

- (b) In some subjects the lecturer demonstrates some aspect of the subject, e.g. solving a problem in front of the students. Just over half the lecturers interviewed claimed to do this. Subjects which did this included economics, accountancy, mathematics and nursing.
- (c) Lecturers in some subjects regarded the aim of lecturing as inducting first year students who were new to that subject into the ways of thinking and models of that subject, e.g. economics. Alternatively, they aimed at providing a conceptual framework for the subject. Half the lecturers in this sample claimed to be doing this.
- (d) Motivation was seen by many (12 of 25) as part of the role of the lecturer: to try to make the students enthusiastic about their subject. An English lecturer (who was interviewed informally, in addition to the 25) stressed this particularly. A history lecturer didn't want his students to take notes. Rather, they should listen as he gave them an inspiring overview of a topic. This would stir them to read further and follow up the ideas in the process of writing an essay.
- (e) Alternatively, some lecturers aimed to teach the students to think critically and not to accept information or assumptions without challenging them, e.g. history and education. A religious studies lecturer wanted to challenge the assumptions of school religious education teaching in his lectures. Eleven of 25 in this sample had thinking critically as an aim.
- (f) Almost all these lecturers emphasized the relationship with assessment. It was implied that a 'good' lecture should result in high grades on the subsequent assessment, whether this be by essay or examination.
- (g) The metaphor of the minister with her/his congregation was invoked by at least one of the sample. A lecturer in a particular subject is a devout adherent of that subject, like a minister in her/his religion. The class is like a congregation. The lecturer tries to induct the class into the mysteries, ideas, values and practices of the subject just as a minister does in her/his sermon. The students are like members of a congregation turning up to hear the sermon. Therefore, the lecturer is not just trying to change the ideas of the students, but also to alter their behaviour, attitudes and values.
- (h) An unusual and interesting model was held by a sports science lecturer. He admired a minister who shook hands with his congregation before a service, thereby creating an ambience of warmth. He tried to emulate this within the constraints of a higher education setting by chatting to the students individually about their sporting achievements before the actual lecture.
- (i) Particular disciplines also had particular aims geared to the needs of that subject, e.g. visual analysis for film and media and the demonstration of skills for nursing.

The Use of Modern Technology (raw data calibrated in Table III)

- (a) The Internet. Lecturers referred students to material on the internet in most subjects.
- (b) Overhead projectors. Most lecturers in this sample used them.

TABLE III. Frequencies of lecturers using the various technologies

Technology	Frequency of lecturers using it (<i>n</i> = 25)
Internet/intranet	9
Overhead projectors	17
PowerPoint	14
Video	5
Handouts	21

- (c) PowerPoint. A majority offered PowerPoint slides on the Intranet to their students before, during or after the lecture. A minority did not offer this service. These lecturers were concerned that, if the students have the main points in advance, either they will not attend or (even if they do attend) they won't pay attention.
- (d) Videos. The lecturers gave four different reasons for using videos. Firstly a business and management lecturer used a video of the best or most up-to-date lecture in the world to present a topic, rather than giving a less technically adept and second-hand account himself. Secondly, accountancy and education lecturers used videos to introduce students to a subject of which they had had no prior experience. Thirdly, a video of a lecture could be used after the lecture as a reference. Students were encouraged to watch the lecture a second time to enable them to try to grasp particular points or broad arguments which they were unable to understand on the initial live presentation. Fourthly, in film and media studies lecturers, regarded watching videos of films as an essential activity.

The Role of Handouts

Here again there was a wide range of responses in terms of the aim:

- to provide a complete record of the course, e.g. business law;
- to provide the main points of the lecture, e.g. film and media and business law;
- to provide information which is supplementary to the lecture.

Some lecturers provide them before, others after the lecture.

The range of formats of the handouts included:

- a course booklet;
- a 40 page handout;
- overhead acetates printed off;
- PowerPoint slides printed off.

Lecturer Y said he didn't use handouts because 'There are lots in the library and they are called textbooks'.

Assessment

On the whole lecturing was tightly geared towards assessment:

- essays, e.g. education, arts and nursing;
- multiple choice tests, e.g. business, nursing (biology component) and biology;
- practical exams, e.g. nursing and biology.

Several lecturers saw their lectures as a means of conveying the assessment needs of the course to the students. In nursing in particular, it was clear that the connection between lecture content and assessment was very close. One lecturer claimed 'The purpose of the lecture is to prepare them for the exam'.

Other Aspects of Lecturing

The role of textbooks. There was a range of responses, from the lectures being tightly geared to a textbook (psychology, economics, nursing, biology, law, accountancy and management accountancy) to no set textbook (education, sports studies and film and media). Lecturers in the latter subjects encourage their students to read a wide range of books, journal articles, official publications and world wide web sites.

The length of a lecture. By far the majority of subjects used a slot of 1 hour. In reality this was a slot of 50 minutes, since five minutes had to be allowed at the start and another five minutes at the end for students to reach their next lecture. However, a few subjects had two hour slots: in reality 1 hour 50 minutes. History actually lectured for 2 hours. Other subjects offered alternative activities in the second hour, such as discussions in small groups or workshops.

What notes are students expected to take? Twenty-two of the 25 lecturers expected their students to take notes. However, there was a great range amongst the lecturers as to what the students were expected to take down. This matched to some extent the range or purpose of the lectures. On the one hand, some lecturers expect the students to take down every point. On the other hand, different lecturers want their students to write nothing at all, but rather to listen and understand. In between these two extremes lecturers in a large number of subjects (e.g. nursing, accountancy and business law) expected their students to take down the main points. Alternatively, if the students were given PowerPoint printouts of the main points, lecturers expected students to add their own points to these.

Post-lecture activities. These largely fell into two categories.

- The lectures were largely a preparation for a subsequent seminar. The ideas are presented (particularly opposite points of view) to be discussed later, e.g. philosophy, history and education. Most lecturers expected that students would review their notes and handouts before the seminar. Where the lecturers were involved in the seminars, they reported that this was normal if not universal behaviour.
- The lectures led into practicals: sciences, nursing and sports science.

Discussion

This was a small-scale study, based on only one university. A more broadly based study needs to be carried out before more powerful generalizations can be made. Nevertheless, a number of interesting pointers arose to add to the very meagre research literature on this important subject.

There was a huge range in the responses. Most lecturers had wholeheartedly embraced the technological revolution, whereas others remained locked in the traditional medieval format. A third group adopted a compromise position: they might offer their students Power Point slides, but only at the lecture, so students had to attend the lectures and were then expected to add their own notes to the handout provided.

Even at this small university there was a vast range in the nature of the subject: from highly complex, abstract subjects such as economics and business law to more applied subjects such as sports studies and nursing. This affected the nature of the possible lecture. A subject such as business law required the lecturer to give a point-by-point account, not missing out a single step or detail, whereas education or history provided a broad sweep of ideas.

In terms of Isaacs's (1994) aims, lecturers in some subjects in this study tried to make their students think critically, e.g. history and education. Others tried to demonstrate the way professionals reason in the subject, e.g. economics. Others tried to make their students more enthusiastic about the subject, e.g. English. Some subjects attempted to give the students the most important information about the subject and/or to explain the most difficult points, e.g. business law. In other subjects it was important to demonstrate how to solve problems, e.g. economics, business law and nursing. An alternative aim was to provide a framework for students private study, e.g. history.

In comparison with Isaacs's (1994) study, the lecturers in this study emphasized the connection between lectures and assessment more.

In terms of Brown's (1978) categories, none of the 25 lecturers claimed to use the classical method in its pure form, possibly because the sciences were almost non-existent in the curriculum. However, the business law lecturer used a modified form of this method. The problem solving method was used by the accounting lecturer. The sequential method was also used by the business law lecturer. The comparison method was one of those used by the three education lecturers. It was probably used in some of the other subjects, although they did not make this explicit. None of the 25 claimed to use the thesis method. It may have been that Brown's strict traditional academic approaches from the 1970s were not considered suitable to motivate the much wider spectrum of first year undergraduate students at the turn of the 21st century in the UK.

However, Sheffield's (1974) study was not considered to be 'dated' in terms of the research reported here. Most of the 25 lecturers laid a great deal of emphasis on their enthusiasm for the subject and on stimulating the interest of their students in their subject.

The findings on taking notes from the lecturers' perspective in general match the findings in Sutherland *et al.* (2002) of note taking from the students' perspective.

It was disappointing to note from a perspective of lecturer–student relationships that very few lecturers questioned students, nor did they encourage students to question them. This is an aspect of the lecture process which lecturers in all subjects will need to address; particularly as the intake of students becomes even broader in terms of prior academic achievement.

Conclusions

This was a small-scale study at a single university. It is not possible to draw highly generalizable conclusions from it. Nevertheless, there were significant indicators which provided hypotheses for further follow-up studies.

In terms of the purpose of lectures there was a considerable range of responses, depending a great deal on the nature of the subject. In most subjects the transfer of information predominated. However, in several subjects lecturers had alternative aims: to inspire students or to get them to think critically. As this study focused on first year students there was a particular (and not surprising) emphasis on initiating new students into the ways of thinking and terminology of subjects which they had not studied at school.

In their response to the opportunities granted by modern technology this sample of lecturers varied from total resistance to total adoption of the world wide web, PowerPoint slides, videos, etc.

Most lecturers gave out handouts before the lecture in order to help students understand the lecture and so that the students could have a structure onto which they could add their own notes. The nature of the handouts varied from a 40 page course booklet to minimal PowerPoint slides.

On the whole, lecturing was tightly geared towards different forms of assessment. Even the lecturer who aimed to inspire his students with a love of his subject did not deny a connection with subsequent assessment of the students. For most lecturers the connection was much more direct than this.

Whether or not they adopted modern technology, most lecturers perceived the lecture as a one-way transmission of information by them to the students. This represents a lack of change in the basic function of the lecture since medieval times. This finding may cause some concern to the educational profession involved with the delivery of further and higher education.

Some questions arising are as follows:

1. How do first year students coming from school connect cognitively with the schemata of subjects which are new to them, e.g. sports studies, film and media, accountancy, law, psychology, education and sociology?
2. Do lecturers perceive the process of lecturing to be different for second, third and fourth year undergraduates and for postgraduates?
3. If lecturers want students to take down only the main points and not every word, how do students know what the important points are?

4. In this research lecturers have been interviewed as to how they perceive lectures. What needs to be done now is for students to be interviewed as to how they perceive lectures. In particular, what do they regard the function of lectures to be? Do the two sets of perceptions match? If not, what can be done about it to help future generations of students?
5. If the lecturers are generally not available to discuss points which trouble students, from whom can they get support? To what extent can and do peers act as Vygotskian mentors?

The criteria for a successful lecture need to be reviewed, from both the research and educational points of view. The information transfer school of research, as described in Sutherland *et al.* (2002), measures this in terms of the students' notes approximating to those of the lecture. Administrators seem to regard student ratings as a crucial criterion. However, neither of these adequately represents the range of aims discussed in the Results section of this study.

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